

IDRC FEATURE

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COUNTDOWN TO UNCSTD

by JEAN-MARC FLEURY

With the approach of the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD), to be held in August in Vienna, preparatory activities around the world have been stepped up. First, each country submitted a national paper on science and technology to the UNCSTD secretariat in New York. Then, a number of national and regional meetings -- with more coming -- were held on themes closely related to the conference. Jean-Marc Fleury sketches an overview of some of these pre-UNCSTD discussions, providing a quick guide to some of the issues that will be raised later this year in Vienna.

Jamaica

Thirty notables from the South (developing countries) and the North (developed countries), some representing transnational corporations, others governments, met in Ocho Rios, Jamaica, in the second week of January. At the invitation of Barbara Ward (Lady Jackson), President of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), they gathered to discuss "Mobilizing Technology for World Development".

One of the most striking and unexpected conclusions of the Jamaica Symposium was the revelation that some 90 to 95 percent of the knowledge needed by the Third World to develop useful technologies is actually free and already within the public domain. Participants felt more emphasis should therefore be put on the dissemination of this information, now mainly stored in university libraries.

Nevertheless, straightforward transfer of knowledge and technology cannot be the solution to development problems; each country must develop strong science and technology (S&T) capabilities in order to choose and adapt imported technologies to national contexts. The symposium underlined the urgency of reinforcing local scientific and technological bases that would provide developing countries with a greater bargaining power in negotiating technology transfers.

It was also obvious to the participants at the Ocho Rios meeting that the solution to many global problems in the fields of energy, raw materials, and climate demand the full participation of all of the world's countries, and thus require that developing countries increase their scientific and technical potential. Among the means suggested to facilitate the growth of local scientific and technical resources, they recommended that governments and donor agencies devote a larger share of their budgets to the support of scientific research in the Third World. They also proposed the establishment of a greater number of international research institutes. They further recommended that transnational corporations stress the training of local technical personnel.

Tallinn (USSR)

While the Jamaica meeting was in progress, about 80 people, most of them from the Soviet Union scientific community, met in Tallinn on the shores of the Baltic Sea.

Although the problems of developing countries were not neglected, the Tallinn Symposium emphasized problems affecting all of mankind. A distinction was made between common and global problems. Common problems, like urbanization, provision of health services, and conservation of water resources, exist almost everywhere, but each country must find solutions adapted to its own physical and cultural conditions.

On the other hand, global problems such as arms limitations, sharing ocean resources, and climatic fluctuations affect humanity as a whole and cannot be definitely solved by one country alone or a small group of countries. Their solution calls for international coordination and action. The final Tallinn report therefore strongly recommended the establishment of many interdisciplinary research institutions. It also recommended greater international cooperation between scientists of all countries.

The Tallinn Symposium in fact provided an opportunity to study the fourth item on the proposed UNCSTD agenda -- science and technology for the future. According to Dr Louis Berlinguet, Senior Vice-President of Canada's International Development Research Centre who had been invited to Tallinn in his role of Vice-President of the UN Advisory Committee on the Application of Science and

Technology to Development (ACAST), the Soviet authorities, by organizing the Tallinn meeting, have clearly demonstrated their interest in UNCSTD.

Singapore

Among the preliminary international conferences held last January, the International Symposium on Science and Technology for Development (ISSTD), held in Singapore from January 22 to 26, is the one most likely to be remembered by history. In fact, for the first time ever, some 19 of the most important of the world's scientific organizations met to plan a concerted attack on underdevelopment. The scientists admitted that development had not until now drawn the attention of a sufficient number of them.

The Singapore Symposium was, above all, a recognition of the responsibilities of scientists toward the 800 million deprived of the Earth, literally left aside by technological progress. Never before had such a meeting committed itself to work for the inclusion of a "New International Scientific Order" in the proposed "New International Economic Order".

Specifically, the Singapore Declaration gave great importance to a massive development of technology institutes in the Third World to train specialized technicians. It also stressed the need "for some of the developed countries to create and fund national, but internationally oriented, bodies to undertake research on the whole spectrum of development problems, similar to organizations already operating in Canada, Sweden, and some other countries". There was a consensus on the importance of providing means by which "an aptitude for science and engineering could be inculcated and nurtured in the young throughout the developing world, and how awareness of scientific promise and national needs could be cultivated". The assembly also suggested that transnationals should be encouraged to operate apprenticeship schemes in modern technology in countries where they operate.

The symposium looked at ways of implementing its recommendations. The creation of a special fund, the "Science and Technology for Development Fund", was proposed to finance the work of a small group whose first task would be to draw up a list of scientific priorities in developing countries. The fund would then contribute to the establishment of a network of international centres focused on developing-country problem areas.

The scientists gathered in Singapore expressed their concern that the lack of active involvement of scientists in development planning and overall implementation of policies had contributed, in part, "to the limited success of two international development decades". The Singapore Declaration expresses the wish that, in the future, scientists become more involved in the search for solutions to development problems. "We must find the solutions," states the Declaration.

The last meeting was held at the end of May in Mexico City to discuss the interaction between science and technology and long-range development goals and strategies. The report and recommendations of this symposium, not yet released, will be presented to UNCSTD with those of numerous other preliminary meetings.

What do these meetings augur for the Vienna Conference? It is difficult to predict the outcome of the conference. The Group of 77, a block of Third World countries formed in the 1960s to achieve common political objectives in the UN and its specialized agencies and which now includes some 120 countries, has confirmed that they intend to use UNCSTD to demand the transfer of technology on more favourable terms from developed countries and also to press for a code of conduct for transnational corporations. They are also asking for a new substantially financed fund for development and a new global scientific information system. These proposals are still in rough form, however, and until the details are worked out, the main issues of the Conference cannot be predicted with any certainty.

One thing is sure, however: in the preliminary conferences there has been a kind of consensus on the need to create more organizations to strengthen and support scientific and technological research for development.

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